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MONTGOMERY COUNTY

Halfway House Takes Sink-or-Swim Approach

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Tucked along office buildings and storefronts just off Rockville Pike -- next to a nail salon and an Allstate sales office -- is a low-slung brick building that gives little notice of the residents inside: more than 125 convicts who leave each day for work.

But a [research study](#) released today will shed a national spotlight on the halfway house and its success at releasing inmates safely back into society.

"This is a model for the future of prison reentry programs," said Anne Piehl, director of the Criminal Justice Program at Rutgers University who researched the facility for the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank in New York.

Unlike many other reentry programs, which rely on job-training, education or counseling, the Montgomery County program is centered on forcing the inmates to find jobs themselves -- using halfway house computers and telephones, Piehl said. Many take public transportation, via the nearby White Flint Metro station, to their jobs.

"It's a little bit of sink or swim," said Piehl, the researcher.

Residents get access to GED classes and 12-step addiction programs. But the halfway house doesn't spend a lot of time on psychoanalysis or determining whether their residents are narcissistic, hedonistic or socially deviant.

Instead, it is their behavior that is judged. If it's good, they are allowed to stay up later, have access to telephone cards and get more frequent visits. For inmates who have never felt the simple rewards of holding a steady job, such privileges, even small ones, seem to work, Piehl said.

She said communities across the country are looking at intensifying their reentry efforts. One reason: The longer sentences imposed on criminals in the past two decades haven't changed the fact that most inmates eventually get out.

"We believe it is safer for the community to have them come through a program like us than to be released stone-cold to the community from a hardened cell," said Stefan LoBuglio, head of pre-release and reentry services for the county Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, whose office is at the halfway house.

Piehl studied employers who have hired the residents, finding that some believed the facility's drug testing requirements meant the residents were more likely to be sober than some other job candidates.

One of those employers, Giant Foods assistant manager Sidney Brooks, has hired 50 to 60 halfway house residents over the past four years, generally starting them out with basic stocking or bagging jobs. Brooks said he has had no problems with the workers while they're in the program.

After they're released from the halfway house, he tries to keep them employed in his store. He said half of them stay with him. The others find jobs closer to their homes or fall back into their old lifestyles without jobs.

The Montgomery halfway house has its limits. It typically doesn't take in killers and violent offenders, who often are shipped off to state prisons. Of the approximately 145 inmates sleeping at the facility, about 105 are county inmates, eight are state inmates and about 32 arrived from the federal prison system.

In her research, Piehl did not study how long the halfway house workers stay employed and out of trouble. But she noted that in calls placed to employers two months after their release from the halfway house, 54 percent said they were with the same employer.

Things don't always work out at the job sites.

"About 10 percent of placements end badly," Piehl wrote in her findings, "either with a dismissal by the employer or removal by concerned staff."

John Keating, owner of Metropolitan Industries, which installs hardware such as mirrors and closet shelving in homes, recalled one such placement. At a job site, the worker shoved a colleague through a wall. "He pushed him in just the right spot, between two studs," Keating said.

But that's the only problem he has had. Keating said he hires out of the facility for unskilled labor positions, finding the halfway house applicants tend to be more sober than the larger hiring pool.

With the slowdown in housing construction, it's tough for Keating to hire anyone. Over the past year, he has shed 32 employees, leaving him 18. One he has kept around is Keith Jacobs, who joined him in June 2007. Before that, Jacobs had sold and used cocaine, wrote bad checks and violated his probation, he said in an interview yesterday, taking a break from one of Keating's job sites.

Jacobs said he tried to get clean and hold onto jobs on his own, but it never stuck. He figures that without the halfway house he could still be on the streets or behind bars. "I'd still probably be in the same situation. I really needed that extra kick," he said.